

County Tells Schools: No More!

Despite rising student population, county says funds are scarce

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Despite a rising student population and a looming teacher pension crisis, Montgomery County Council members said the piggy bank is empty when they met with the county's school board over lunch Tuesday to discuss next year's budget.

For county council members, Tuesday was the first day back in session after a month-long regularly scheduled break, but students have been back in MCPS classrooms for nearly five weeks. School board members stressed that the county budget would have to comply with state maintenance-of-effort law by offering a fiscal year 2012 schools budget of at least \$2.2 billion to match the amount proposed for the fiscal year 2011 budget.

The meeting has likely set the tone for the upcoming year, once again putting the schools in one corner and the county council in the other for a year-long boxing match. County council members held their ground, saying that money is simply out of the question with tax revenue projections flat-lining. School board members countered schools could simply not be run on anything less nor could they spare to cut any programs.

"I don't know what the solution is going to look like," said school board Vice President Christopher Barclay (Dist. 4) at the suggestion of making cuts. "But if we stop doing some of these things, it's doomsday."

Council members said the school system would likely have to cut money from employee salary and benefit packages — which account for 80 cents of every dollar in their budget, according to budget documents for fiscal year 2011. More than 2,620 public school employees each earn more than \$100,000 a year.

"We all know what is at stake here," Council Vice President Valerie Ervin (D-Dist. 2) said. "It is compensation and benefits — we don't have any other places to cut."

The county council acknowledged the potential for the cost of teacher pensions to be passed from state government to individual counties and said they would help the school board fight it.

Both sides stressed the importance of avoiding the bitterness of April's budget process when the school board sued the council. Funding for schools makes up 57 percent of the county's overall operating budget, a percentage that has nearly doubled since Superintendent of Schools Jerry Weast took office 11 years ago.

Weast also joined the discussion in his first public appearance since August when he announced his retirement from the school system at the end of this academic year, but he said little beyond quoting numbers.

“There are 2,300 more students this fall than last which means an additional student in each classroom and that increase is only going to grow over the next five to 10 years,” Weast said. He added that educating the growing number of students living on fixed incomes or in poverty would put more strain on the school system to help them compete at the same level of the other students.

“We need some sort of Plan B — it’s necessary,” Councilman Marc Erich (D-At large) said.